



# “Let Me Tell You a Story”

Text: Mark 4:1-34

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Telling a story is not as easy as it may appear, but we all like a good story told well. Sometimes it has nothing to do with the subject of the story. Uninteresting stories can become interesting simply by the way they are shared. Apparently humorless stories can put us on the floor with laughter, if told by someone who can let out the “funny.” When it comes to a good story - a great story - the story-teller is just as important as the story itself.

Twain is, of course, one of my favorite story-tellers. His stories were strong on their own, grounded in the human condition. His fertile imagination enabled him to find the humor and the pathos that dwell within the human heart. He knew that sorrow and joy were two sides of the same coin. And he was one of the first to write in a dialect, so that his characters came to life in our minds.

A good story-teller will give us just enough information about the characters and setting and plot to invite us into the story. We become a part of the story, simply by the fact that we are listening to the story being laid out before us. As listeners - or as readers - we bring something to the story, which make the story unique to us.

While Jesus began his ministry in Mark’s gospel by healing people and calling some to be his disciples, this week Jesus begins tell stories to share the good news. We know these stories as “parables” and Jesus not only tells great stories, he tells them really well. Jesus invites his audience - old and new - to find their place in the stories and explore their possible meanings.

But, there is a warning. Too often we read the parables of Jesus as allegories - this stands for this and that stands for that. And sometimes Jesus himself tells us just enough to assist us in formulating an interpretation.

However, in Mark's gospel, the precise meaning of Jesus' parables remains a secret. Definitive interpretations are not offered. But those who possess the right kind of ears - ears that are able to listen deeply and avoid superficial and surface noise - will hear the very word of God.

In the passage from Mark that is before us this morning, we read a full-blown parable, known to us as "the parable of the sower." That is followed by a parabolic saying concerning lighting a lamp. Then comes the short "parable of the harvest." And the last of the parables is "the parable of the mustard seed."

Since our time is short, we'll only consider the story about the "sower who went out to sow." But, we need a quick lesson in farming practice. In Jesus' day, farmers - sowers - didn't have fancy machines that planted one seed at a time. Back then, a farmer would take a sack of seeds and walk back and forth across his property, throwing the seed in front, to the left, and to the right. Seed flew everywhere! It was more like planting grass seed today, than digging the little trench and planting a single seed, as we do in our backyard gardens.

So, this sower is chucking seeds all over the place in the hope of a good crop of wheat or barley. As the seed is broadcast from the sower's hand, some seed fell on hardened ground and the birds came and took it. (See my backyard bird and squirrel feeders for further illustration.) Some of the seed fell on rocky, inhospitable ground, and when the mid-day sun beat down on the ground, the seeds, which had sprouted, withered and died. Some of the seed fell among thorns and weeds and when they sprouted, they were immediately choked out by the useless plants. And some seed fell into the good rich soil and produced an amazing - one might even say "miraculous" - harvest.

When the disciples question Jesus about the parable, Jesus tells them that the soils of the parable are not unlike the way the Word of God finds its way into the world. Sometimes the Word falls onto the ground of hardened hearts and it is snatched away by the forces that oppose God. Sometimes the Word falls onto the rocky ground of human hearts, which welcomes it for a moment, but then succumbs to the pressures and vicissitudes of life. Sometimes the Word falls onto the unwelcoming ground of human hearts and fails to grow in the shade of the greater desire for popularity, wealth, and success.

How many sermons have we all heard about the different soils and how we should make our lives "good soil" so the Word of God can take root in our lives? We've all heard those sermons! It's a given! Jesus preached it himself!

But, as an old farmer once told me, “dirt is dirt.” You can’t change the essential chemical make-up of dirt. You can add nutrients and fertilizers, but dirt is dirt! Human hearts are human hearts - fickle, receptive, deceptive, truthful, filled with falsehood, brave, and cowardly. Dirt is dirt.

However, consider the Sower. This is where my attention was captured this time around. The image of the Sower - chucking seeds - flinging seeds like a toddler who has just figured out how to throw a ball. The Sower, launching seeds in every direction with wild abandon. The Sower - generously and indiscriminately - firing seeds in every direction in the hope and expectation that a harvest will not be denied.

Now, according to Jesus, the seed is the Word of God. The only person who can sow the seed of the Word of God is - well, God. So, maybe we need to begin understanding this parable by understanding that God flings God’s own Word into the world with wild abandon. God launches the creative and recreative Word into the world in every direction. God chucks the Word into the world like a toddler chucking a ball - or anything else. God generously and indiscriminately fires the healing Word of wholeness and life into the world in the hope of producing a miraculous harvest of righteousness and authenticity.

In our need to make the parable about ourselves and figure out what kind of soil we are, we have forgotten to begin by remembering how generously and profusely and open-handedly God gives to us. And when we consider that, we see how stingy, sparing, and parsimonious we can be toward others. We see how our prejudices affect with whom we share the Word. When we consider the incredible generosity of God, we see how miserly we can be.

The good news of God’s saving and restoring love is to be shared with wild abandon. It is to be hurled into the world without restraint, without moderation, and without discrimination. It is the good news for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the wise and the foolish, the good and the less-than-good. It is the good news that opens new doors to new life and new ways of living. It is the good news that brings hope in the midst of despair, truth in the midst of falsehood, courage in the face of cowardice, justice in the presence of wrongdoing. It is the very Word of Life - life as God envisioned it to be.

So, maybe the question is not - in the first place - what kind of soil we are, as it is what kind of sowers are we?

Let me tell you a story. One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked he came upon a young boy who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one.

Puzzled, the man looked at the boy and asked what he was doing. Without looking up from his task, the boy simply replied, "I'm saving these starfish, Sir".

The old man chuckled aloud, "Son, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"

The boy picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water and turning to the man, said, "I made a difference to that one!"

Now, that's a lovely story. It's a story about making a difference. It's a story about feeling accomplishment. It's a story, ultimately, about the one doing the saving and not about the one being saved. It's a lovely story.

But it's not a gospel story.

The gospel won't wait for a one-at-a-time approach. If it did, the Sower would have planted one seed to see if and how it turned out. Then the Sower would have planted another seed and waited again. Even God doesn't have time for that.

Yes, let's pray that we will be good and worthy soil. But let's give thanks that the Sower sows more generously - and dare we say "liberally" - than we are inclined to be. Give thanks to the One who tells the stories and sows the seeds.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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